

reviews

James Kippen. *The Tabla of Lucknow: A cultural analysis of a musical tradition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

The city of Lucknow was the center of fine arts patronage in North India from the mid-eighteenth century until the Indian Mutiny of 1857. Although its cultural prominence has been in decline ever since, Lucknow remains host to one of the major *gharanas* (family musical traditions) of the Hindustani drum-pair, the tabla. The Lucknow *gharana* and its cultural setting are the subjects of James Kippen's worthy study, *The Tabla of Lucknow*.

The emphasis of many modern ethnomusicological studies has shifted away from the study of reified musical products to a more humanistic, anthropologically-informed focus upon musicians, socio-cultural contexts, performance norms, and emic conceptions about music. Kippen makes it clear that his intent is to "tread the middle path" between these two approaches, giving relatively equal weight to each. In such a relatively slim (222 pages) volume, such a treatment necessarily precludes the depth and breadth of the focussed studies of tabla music by Stewart and Gottlieb, as well as the extensive anthropological research of Neuman.¹ Nevertheless, the emphasis on the under-researched Lucknow school and, more importantly, the abundance of fresh insights and original material make Kippen's book a highly informative and valuable contribution to the study of Indian music.

Kippen's first three chapters consist of a concise and highly readable "history of music" (by which he means classical and light-classical music) and description of cultural life in Lucknow, from its heyday as the site of the final sunset of Mughal culture, up to the present, which finds the city as a relatively provincial backwater. Despite the primary focus upon Lucknow, many of Kippen's observations apply to North Indian music and culture in general. Particularly illuminating are his discussions of the attitudes musicians and audiences hold toward each other, and the complex and in some cases conflicting social hierarchies by which classical musicians rank themselves. Kippen outlines clearly the various parameters governing these hierarchies, *viz.*, caste, employment, age, wealth, education, *gharana*, instrumental medium, and of course, expertise. His discussion of "politics"—i.e., the back-biting, jealousy, intrigue, and sordid competition endemic among Hindustani musicians—eloquently portrays the way these unsavory features of cultural life balance the refined etiquette, gentility,

and polished speech for which Lucknovites are celebrated. The author's frequent introduction of his own personal vignettes and experiences lends much immediacy and credibility to his arguments and style, while avoiding the self-indulgence found in some contemporary ethnological studies. Throughout the book, however, Kippen places primary emphasis on the emic, i.e., on the attitudes of his informants and of Indians in general.

It is not until the fourth chapter that Kippen finally addresses the tabla. He commences by convincingly refuting Neuman's (rather dated) assertion that tabla lineages are not true *gharanas*, but rather are organized in terms of *biradaris* or "brotherhoods";² anyone immersed in the Indian music scene discovers, as Kippen observes, that tabla players and other Hindustani musicians do routinely refer to tabla schools as *gharanas*, even if they are not so esteemed as vocal *gharanas*. The Lucknow *gharana* of tabla, as Kippen outlines, evolved primarily in connection with *kathak* dance, which played only a secondary formative role in the development of other tabla styles. This tie with *kathak*, while lending the *gharana* a distinctive style and repertoire, came to constitute a liability insofar as it implied a close association with the courtesans (*tawa'ifs*), who, although once custodians of high culture, are now regarded as embarrassments by the new patrons of Indian music, the bourgeoisie. More dramatically, Lucknow tabla players have suffered from the general decline of public interest in art music in their city, as patronage has shifted to the industrial centers of Delhi, Bombay, and Calcutta. Public concerts in Lucknow are now rarities, the *tawa'if* world has degenerated, and the remaining musicians must compete for private tuitions, irregular radio and television opportunities, and frustrating teaching positions at the Bhatkhande Music College.

Kippen discusses how today's tabla players—indeed, like many Hindustani musicians—have deliberately tried to create a new image for themselves as educated, "respectable," and middle-class, in order to disassociate themselves from the persisting bourgeois ambivalence toward traditional musicians as illiterate, unscrupulous sidekicks of *tawa'ifs*. Conversely, classical musicians tend to regard their new audience—the middle class—as bores, addicted to light *ghazals* and film music and incomparably more ignorant of art music than were the former patrons of classical music, the feudal elite. Given the stagnant musical scene in Lucknow, and the inherently recondite nature of many aspects of tabla music, Kippen's observations, while again applicable to the Hindustani music scene as a whole, are particularly apt for Lucknow tabla players.

Kippen's book is one of the few publications to discuss stylistic adaptations that tabla style has undergone in accommodating to its new role as accompaniment to instrumental music. He shows that the new emphasis on virtuosity has led to many brilliant innovations while stressing faster,

easier, more dramatic "machine-gun" patterns at the expense of more varied and difficult traditional strokes and compositions which are harder to execute at fast speeds. While Zakir Hussein must still be regarded as one of the most extraordinary geniuses of twentieth-century Indian music, it is interesting to find Kippen daring to fault him, however respectfully, in this matter. Also of interest is Kippen's assertion that sitarist Ravi Shankar must be regarded as one of the most important figures in modern tabla music, since it was allegedly he who commenced the practice of allowing the previously subjugated tabla players to play solos in a duet format with the melodic instrument. Perhaps Ravi Shankar's teacher, Allaudin Khan, should be better credited with this important innovation, since contemporary recordings of other instrumentalists suggest that the practice was in vogue at least by 1950.

Chapter VI is devoted to tabla pedagogy, and contrasts the traditional *gurushishya* ("teacher-disciple") format with the uninspired, under-funded, impersonal, and generally inefficient situation prevailing in the Bhatkhande College, as in innumerable other music schools and departments throughout the country. Kippen rightly doubts the inflated boasts that musicians are wont to make about the length and intensity of their practice, but certainly goes too far in stating that he "rarely came across a musician who could be said to be displaying anything even remotely resembling discipline and perseverance in practice" (p. 128). The technical virtuosity expected of modern Hindustani musicians cannot be acquired without years of diligence; my own impression is that most competent musicians have indeed practiced at least two or three hours daily throughout their formative—primarily teenage—years, although this is a far cry from the claims frequently heard from Indian musicians.

The last two chapters describe the Lucknow tabla style in technical terms, employing graphs and a modified notation system which the author has devised to illustrate finger techniques as well as sound. A cassette containing the relevant examples can be obtained from the publisher.

Much scholarly work on the tabla remains to be done, exploring such matters as the early development of its repertoire, the way the instrument accompanies dance, and the original purpose and context of the tabla's vast—and generally unused—solo repertoire. Kippen's book, nevertheless, provides a distinctively insightful contribution to the study of the tabla, and in this reviewer's opinion constitutes one of the better books on Indian music in recent years. It is a pity that at \$65.00 (plus \$14.95 for the cassette) the book may be too expensive for many interested readers.

—Peter Manuel

NOTES

¹ Robert Gottlieb, *The Major Traditions of North Indian Drumming*, 2 vols. (Munich: Emil Katzbibhler, 1977); Daniel Neuman, "The Cultural Structure and Social Organization of Musicians in India: The Perspective from Delhi," Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1975; and Rebecca Stewart, "The Tabla in Perspective," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1974.

² Neuman, "The Cultural Structure," 147, 207.